



The Creation of the North German Confederation

This is a transcript of the “Creation of the North German Confederation” podcast from www.mrallsophistory.com

In the last podcast we saw how, by the early 1860s, Prussia had emerged as the dominant state in Germany. Prussia’s dominance continued under the stewardship of Otto von Bismarck as Minister-President from 1862. There is no argument that Bismarck had a major role to play in the eventual unification of Germany under Prussian leadership, but it is important to remember that in history events are often a product of a wider combination of circumstances. While you may conclude that Bismarck was the deciding factor, you must acknowledge that other issues played a part in the unification as well. Some of these other factors, such as the Prussian economy and the changing balance of power between Prussia and Austria, have been covered in previous podcasts which you can download from my website at www.mrallsophistory.com

It was on top of these foundations that Bismarck built. However, in order to fully understand the character and policies of Bismarck it is worth considering why he became Minister-President in the first place. In 1862 Prussia was facing an internal conflict over the efficiency of the army and the balance of power between government and parliament. The Minister of War, von Roon, put forward a series of proposals to improve the army, which Wilhelm I agreed with. However, the improvements would mean an increase in military spending that was to be achieved through increased taxation. The measures but met significant opposition from Parliament, where the Progressives refused to vote for the increased military spending. Since taxation and expenditure required parliamentary approval, they hoped to press the King to grant constitutional reforms in return for them approving the Army Reforms. The King felt as if his authority was being undermined – that he was being held to ransom – and believed his position was so precarious that the only option was to abdicate.

Von Roon proposed a different solution. He suggested that the King bring in Bismarck to deal with parliament, as he had a reputation for strong tactics and outspoken views. The belief was that Bismarck could force the Army Reforms through Parliament. This was proved correct. After a failed attempt at compromise, Bismarck forced the reforms through without parliamentary approval. He illegally introduced a law to collect increased taxes, approved the army reforms, restricted the press in order to stifle criticism of his actions, and pressurised state officials into being loyal. Bismarck’s reputation had been proved to be accurate – all moral and ethical considerations were ignored in favour of acting in the interests of the greater state power. This type of political dealing as used by Bismarck is known as *Realpolitik* whereby he justified his often illegal, immoral or unethical actions because the end result was worth it. Against the domineering Bismarck, the Progressives in parliament didn’t stand a chance.

With Bismarck’s position in government now secured thanks to his aggressive dealings with parliament, he was able to move forward with consolidating Prussian authority. First and foremost, Bismarck was a proud Prussian. He wanted Prussia, not Austria, to be the leading power in Germany, but was wary of the impact that this could have on the European balance of power.



Bismarck's first foray into the international arena did not go well for him at the time, but had a long-term benefit. In 1863 a Polish revolt took place in the part of Poland controlled by Russia. Bismarck immediately sent more troops into the Prussian part of Poland and sealed the border with Russia. In an attempt to elevate Prussia's international reputation he then offered to help Russia deal with uprising. This action was not only refused, but actually caused offence to all the major European powers who felt that Prussia was acting above its station – a bit like an arrogant 11-year-old offering to help a 17-year old in an argument. Although this incident alienated Prussia, Bismarck did benefit in the long-term from an unforeseen result of the Polish revolt. Russia, who responded to the revolt with violent repression, lost the support of France who had strongly disagreed with its response. This meant that when Prussia declared war on France in 1870 Russia – in return – refused to cooperate and assist the French army. Consequently, the Polish Revolt is a good example to show that some of Bismarck's foreign policy success was down to good fortune just as much as skill. There is little doubt that Bismarck was a talented politician, but it's important to remember that in a number of cases the outcome owed a lot to luck as well.

Having had his fingers burned thanks to his overenthusiastic involvement in the Polish revolt, Bismarck was much more cautious during the Schleswig-Holstein Crisis that erupted in 1863. The Treaty of London that was signed in 1852 stated that Denmark could exercise control over the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein as long as they did not take them over completely. However, in 1863 the Danish King Frederick VII tried to do just that. The Danish action was met with a massive outbreak of nationalist feeling across the German states, with many people volunteering to go to war in order to free the duchies from Danish control.

Bismarck, however, did not share these nationalist sympathies. He did not want another independent state in Northern Germany as this would be a threat Prussian dominance. However, he knew that his preferred option of Prussian annexation of Schleswig-Holstein would be unacceptable to other European powers – especially Austria. In response, therefore, he opted to form a conservative alliance with Austria. After a period of cautious attempts to try to enforce the Treaty of London, in January 1864 Prussia and Austria sent a joint army into Schleswig.

The war against Denmark was short and decisive. Austria and Prussia emerged as the victorious powers, and agreed on joint control of Schleswig-Holstein for the immediate future. The Convention of Gastein in 1865 formalised the agreement with the Austrian Emperor Franz Josef and the Prussian King Wilhelm I agreeing that Austria would administer Holstein and Prussia would run Schleswig.

The agreement didn't last. Just months after the Convention of Gastein being signed, Bismarck met with Emperor Napoleon III at Biarritz to discuss how the French might respond in the event of an Austro-Prussian War. After hinting that France could gain territory in the Rhineland, and that Austrian territory in Venetia in Northern Italy would go to Italy, Bismarck successfully persuaded Napoleon to remain neutral. However, some historians believe that Napoleon would have stayed out of the war anyway – there is an argument that he hoped Prussia and Austria would tire each out in a war, allowing the French army to move in and finish them both off.

Whatever France's motives, with French neutrality secured and Russia refusing to help Austria due to the diplomatic failures of the Crimean War, Bismarck needed just a little more weight to decisively tip the scales in Prussia's favour against Austria. In 1866, therefore, he formed an alliance with Italy,



based on the principal that it would fight Austria within 3 months. As tensions continued to develop between Austria and Prussia, both prepared for war. Concerned about the growing possibility of a conflict, Austria promised to halt mobilisation if Prussia did the same. Keen to appear reasonable, Prussia agreed. However, Italian troop movements as promised by the alliance prompted Austria to mobilise its southern army and gave Prussia the excuse to renew the mobilisation of its own armies in response.

Prussia, therefore, appeared to be mobilising its troops only because Austria did so. However, actually declaring war would still make Prussia appear to be the aggressor and Bismarck wanted to avoid that stigma. Consequently he was lucky that, at this point, Austria asked the Federal Diet to decide the future of Schleswig Holstein. This breached the Gastein Convention and provided Prussia with an excuse to send troops into Holstein. In response Austria sought the support of the Confederation against Prussia while Prussia warned that any vote of support would be seen as a declaration of war. The motion was carried by 9 – 6. After the Confederation states refused to demobilise their troops, Prussia was afforded the excuse to occupy Saxony, Hanover and Hesse-Cassel. Although there is little doubt that Bismarck was planning to go to war against Austria, he had successfully made it appear that Prussia was only responding to Austrian aggression.

It took just seven weeks for Prussia to defeat Austria. Although having to fight on two fronts certainly weakened Austria, the tactics of the Prussian commander von Moltke, and the superior weaponry of the Prussian army, made significant contributions to the Prussian victory. The war itself ended after Napoleon III brokered an armistice between the two powers. Although Wilhelm I and leading Prussian Generals actually wanted to push on to Vienna and score a decisive victory over Austria, Bismarck recognised that a longer war would result in greater French intervention.

The Peace of Prague that was signed in 1866 between Austria and Prussia met almost all of Bismarck's immediate objectives. Firstly, the German Confederation was abolished and replaced by a new North German Confederation which excluded Austria. This North German Confederation was dominated by Prussia, who also annexed a number of states including Hesse-Cassel and Schleswig-Holstein which significantly enlarged the Prussian borders. However, French intervention at the peace conference meant that a number of larger southern states remained independent. Bismarck knew that to take on France at this point would be political and military suicide. It was therefore to be another five years before Prussia was able to truly dominate Germany.